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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JERUSALEM 002260

SIPDIS

NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE AND IPA; NSC FOR SHAPIRO/KUMAR; JOINT STAFF FOR LTGEN SELVA

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TAGS: PGOV KPAL KIRF KISL KWBG IS  
SUBJECT: WEST BANK MOSQUE TORCHED, SETTLERS SUSPECTED

REF: A. TEL AVIV 2617  
1B. JERUSALEM 2224

Classified By: Consul General Daniel Rubinstein  
for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Before dawn on December 11, a mosque was set afire in the Palestinian village of Yasuf, south of Nablus, according to Palestinian Authority security officials. Local contacts and press report that Israeli settlers from Kfar Tappuach are suspected of the arson, which was the latest of a string of "price tag" actions undertaken to protest the GOI moratorium on new residential construction in West Bank settlements. Later in the day, Israeli press reported that Yasuf residents clashed with Israel Defense Forces (IDF) personnel inside the village. PA security officials warned of an "escalation" of settler-Palestinian violence, and told Post they had informed the IDF of their "grave concern." End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Just before dawn on December 11, the main mosque in the West Bank village of Yasuf, located east of Salfit and south of Nablus, was set aflame. According to municipal council sources, the mosque's library was damaged, as were other parts of the building. Post contacts said that Hebrew-language graffiti reading "we will burn you," and "price tag" was sprayed on the building's outer walls. Note: "Price tag" is the term adopted over the past two years by extremist settlers for violent acts undertaken in response to outpost evacuation attempts by the IDF. End note. PA security officials tell Post that Israeli settlers from the nearby Kfar Tappuach settlement are suspected of the arson, and local press reports that Israeli authorities have opened an investigation.

¶3. (C) PA General Intelligence (GI) Chief Majid Faraj and National Security Force (NSF) West Bank Commander Abu al-Fatah contacted Post on December 11 to register their strong concern. Both said the IDF was notified of the incident shortly after the fire was set, at approximately 4:00 a.m. local time, but that the IDF did not respond or otherwise engage with the PA until about 7:00 a.m. local time, three hours later. Al-Fatah noted that the "entire area of Tappuach settlement," where the suspected perpetrators live, is under IDF control. "The IDF should have prevented it -- or at least showed up when they were called," he said. Note: Yasuf village and its farmlands straddle Areas B and C, both of which are under full Israeli security control, and which PA security forces cannot enter without IDF permission. End note.

¶4. (C) Faraj said the incident was "very dangerous," adding, "this provides conducive grounds to inflame religious feelings, and makes it harder for the Palestinian security forces to control the situation." Faraj noted separately, "we will continue to try to provide security, despite all the

difficult circumstances. But inflaming a religious war is the highest level of escalation." Faraj said he had informed the GOI of his "grave concern" that the IDF and Israeli police were unable to curb spreading settler violence, and stressed that Israeli security forces must start taking effective measures against settlers in the West Bank before the situation spiraled out of control.

¶15. (C) According to Hebrew-language daily Yediot Achronot, Israeli police and military forces visited Yasuf on December 11 after villagers filed complaints about the damage caused to the mosque. Yediot reported that Yasuf villagers threw stones at the IDF upon their arrival into the village, and that the IDF responded with tear gas and live fire, leaving two Palestinians lightly injured. Israeli daily Haaretz reported Munir al-Abushi, Governor of Salfit, as confirming the details of the altercation. "It's tense in the territories," Rabbi Yehiel Grenimann of Rabbis for Human Rights told PolOff on December 11. "I was out in the fields yesterday. The settlers are tense because of the (moratorium-related) stop-orders that are being issued."

¶16. (C) Several GOI officials publicly criticized the incident, including Brigadier General Yoav Mordechai, head of the Civil Administration, and Israeli Minister of Defense Ehud Barak, who was quoted in Haaretz as saying, "this is an extremist act geared toward harming the government's efforts to advance the political process for the sake of Israel's future." Eal Hareuveni, a researcher at NGO B'tselem, told PolOff on December 11 that "Tappuach contains some of the most racist settlers. They follow Rabbi Meir Kahane's

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ideology of carrying out violence against Arabs. They espouse the price tag policy -- there's a long record of racist acts perpetuated by settlers from Tappuach."

¶17. (C) David Ha'Ivri -- a Kfar Tappuach resident, dual Israeli-U.S. citizen, former Kahane-affiliate, and current spokesperson for the Shomron Liaison Office -- told PolOff on December 11, "I don't know anything about the situation. As a sixteen-year resident of Tappuach, I can tell you, the residents of Tappuach do not visit Yasuf. If you ask any of the residents, none of them will be able to show you where the mosque is located." He argued that "the relationship between Arabs and Jews (in the area) has never been calm. The situation there is tense. Tappuach has a full fence (enclosure) and full security guard force -- yes, they (settlers) feel threatened."

¶18. (SBU) As reported in Reftels, IDF spokesmen, PA security officers, NGOs, and Post contacts have all warned recently of possible escalation in the severity of attacks by Israeli settlers against Palestinians in reprisal for GOI attempts to enforce the moratorium on new residential construction in West Bank settlements. On December 4, local media reported that vehicles and buildings in the West Bank village of Einabus, south of Nablus, were set ablaze, and more than 50 trees were uprooted in the area. On December 8, Israeli media reported that multiple residents of French Hill -- a Jerusalem neighborhood with a number of Arab homes -- awoke to find their tires slashed. Graffiti found the same morning on exterior walls and cars in the area read, "this is a price tag" and "if we are frozen, we will freeze your lives as well."

RUBINSTEIN